The Long March Ahead: A Veteran's Place in Resistance

The day after the election felt all too familiar. It felt like 9/11. Then, as now, that day only promised a long road ahead. The years that followed, I dreaded a war I felt duty bound to fight. I was only twelve on 9/11, but I came from a family a Vietnamese refugees, for whom war and resistance is as much a part of the fabric of our lives as family reunions and weddings. We have always fought for whichever country we called home, Vietnam under the French, both the communist north and American-backed south, and now the United States. My brother and I both fought in Afghanistan, and my family shed no tears when we deployed because for us it was inevitable—we fight.

Before all of that, on 9/11, amidst the anguish and strife, I somehow had the presence of mind to think:

Welcome to the rest of the world, America.

I thought the same thing the day Trump claimed victory. Yugoslavia came to mind that morning. My friend Sara, a Croatian-American writer, likened a Trump presidency to the election of Slobodan Milošević. The hate-speech and ultra-nationalism of the Trump Campaign were the same starting points for ethnic cleansing and genocide in the Yugoslav wars. To many, Yugoslavia was once a paragon of multi-culturalism, but we witnessed a model society descend into conflict distinguished by crimes against humanity. In *Love Thy Neighbor*, Peter Maas writes that before the Bosnian War started, Yugoslavs thought the brazen inhumanity that occurred would be impossible. They satirized and lampooned the idea of a civil war on national TV. All it took were a few—a small, cursed, hateful few—to throw a once great nation into turmoil.

My wife and I spent the whole day texting, asking, *what are we going to do?* She told me that she wasn't going to be one of those Jews that waited in Berlin until the day they put her onto a train; she wasn't going to just wait and see. Some part of me wondered if we were being irrational, these epigenetic memories of pogroms and falling napalm—surely these nightmares would never come to fruition? We have middle class jobs, a rent-stabilized apartment, we vote in local elections—surely it would never come to violence? I asked myself if everything I worked towards—my art, my family, my dreams—would be cut short by another conflict. The soldier in me yearned for the comfort my M4 carbine gave me in Afghanistan, but I didn't fight for an America ruled by the rifle rather than the ballot.

I was told by white men in my life to be patient, wait for the smoke to clear because it cannot be as bad as everyone thinks. One man told me that the campaign's bigotry might subside, that it was only a tactic to get into power. He said that the adult thing to do now was to build bridges, as if my anger at the election's result was childish—now wasn't the time to take up arms. I remember thinking that no one would come for him for being the wrong skin color, for saying the wrong thing.

I knew then that resistance was my only option. I struggled with that decision. I wondered if I was just contributing to a deeper division in a country that seemed split nearly straight down the middle. Right wrong or indifferent, we elected Trump president—by action or inaction, we are all responsible. Yet it can't be just about healing, because the people that brought Trump to power seem to have little interest in bridging the divide given the uptick in hate-speech.

My wife and I took to the streets Wednesday, the ninth of November alongside thousands. We flooded Union Square. A city in despair called out, voices echoing through glass and concrete canyons. Those voices became one. Though we disrupted the organized chaos of Manhattan rush hour, bystanders cheered

us from their city buses, honked their horns in solidarity, even joined us. Rain fell, but we were warm. When the night was over, I felt purged of despair. I am wary of emotionally cathartic experiences, because poverty, illness, and war have taught me that catharsis can be a cheap illusion, but I thought I felt something genuine.

That Saturday, I marched again. There were thousands more demonstrators on Fifth Avenue, where veterans had paraded with their flags and patriotic banners just the day before. There was something subdued about the demonstration, contained—police barriers formed a fence between us and pedestrians shopping at upscale retailers or couples leaving from brunch. The mass of protestors stretched for dozens of city blocks—it was hard to see where the huddled bodies began and ended, but there were times when the slogans and chanting stopped, falling into a cowed silence. It had only been a few days, and I worried that the collective passion that compelled us to gather had somehow subsided.

The closer we came to Trump's tower, the closer the police hemmed us in. A block away, the demonstrators were penned in on all sides by barricades. I speculated on how many of the men and women the NYPD would be called on to enforce the systemic cleansing of the country proposed by Trump and his cohort. How many would relish it? Would I count them among the enemy soon?

It's just a job, most of the officers said when I asked them why they joined the force.

The black officers laughed when we started chanting, *Fuck Giuliani*.

I told one sergeant from the Seven-Seven out of Prospect Heights that I was sorry they had to spend their Saturday out here.

"At least it gets us out of Brooklyn," he said.

When we reached the police blockade below that glaring, obsidian edifice, Trump supporters—young men in their twenties perhaps—heckled the crowd. These men—or boys—were not the white working-class poor, those rust-belt disenfranchised that the new media looked to scapegoat after the election. They were patricians, dressed in expensive oxford shirts and high-end outdoor jackets. I can't remember what they said; I just remember their smug self-assuredness. While the others around me tried to ignore them, I yelled back. I wore a hat that read *Operation Enduring Freedom Veteran*, with a Combat Action Badge embroidered at the center.

"Motherfucker," I said, "why don't you go down to the recruiting station and put your money where your mouth is."

While his friends backed down, one of them leaned over the barricade and shouted louder. I didn't hear what he said over the sound of my own voice responding in kind. As we marched past I slung insult after insult until they were out of sight. I used my status as a veteran to humiliate him, and some part of me is ashamed, because I forgot that I didn't just fight for my idea of what America should be, but his as well.

By that point, my friends were tired and hungry. Everyone's enthusiasm had dissipated. As we wriggled out of the pen, street vendors hawked cheap light-up toys out of granny carts and high-school kids took selfies, while an activist festooned with leftist pins and patches performed for a news anchor on the other side of the corral.

Free of the crowd, I watched the spectacle from the perspective of the cameras and passers-by. I remembered that they protested in Yugoslavia too, but tens of thousands had to die before Milošević was brought to justice. Almost everyone hoped for a peaceful resolution—everyone but the ultranationalists who laid their genocidal plans. In *Love Thy Neighbor*, Maas captured the laments of Bosnians caught unprepared for the violence that would beset them for nearly

three years. As I watched the crowd disperse, I wondered if I too would be caught underprepared—outgunned, outmanned, starving. I wondered how many of these women and men around me would be willing to take up arms. Perhaps my greatest asset as a veteran was my capacity for violence, my ability to fight and kill, but the idea dismayed me.

When my train crossed the Manhattan Bridge, my wife texted me.

Traffic is totally fucked on bway/ in the 20s

Good job

Social media, the news, my friends—they all noticed the stand against hate. The whole country watched—continues to watch those that struggle for equality. I understood then that as a veteran, I am not an asset because of my capacity for destruction. We veterans seeking to fulfill our country's promise of liberty and justice for all are assets because of our capacity to organize. Going forward, we must exercise and teach our acumen for strategic decision-making, our ability to marshal resources, our ability to lead. If America is to resist the threat of mass deportation, hate crimes, and free-speech suppression, it will need its veterans.

Perhaps the day will come when we must defend our communities against violence, but violence is a tool of last resort. We would do well to remember that organizations like the Black Panther Party, Young Lords, and the American Indian Movement were populated and led by veterans who sought to build community, contrary to the popular narrative that they were terror organizations. Veterans are already standing up to Trump's vision for America. Organizations like Common Defense are speaking out against misogyny and homophobia, and Veterans for Peace are standing in solidarity with Muslim Americans in their #vetsvshate social-media campaign.

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Professor and Albert Einstein Institution founder Gene Sharp outlined 198 methods

of non-violent action to resist the threat of hate looming before us. For now, mass protests are important to show the country how many of us oppose racism, sexism, and homophobia, but there is more work to be done. What stands out about these methods is that in aggregate they amount to the formation of an alternative society. Nonviolent methods can be performed by any of us, from members of the government to workers and consumers. Sharp's protégé Jamilia Raqib gave a TED talk on using these nonviolent methods to disrupt and ultimately dismantle tyrannical regimes like Daesh, but they could easily be applied to a Trump autocracy. She says, "The greatest hope for humanity lies not in condemning violence but in making violence obsolete." Our country needs us again, whether infantry, mechanics, or logisticians—our skills can build that alternative society together.

There is already so much hate in our country, and those of us who fought know that war is not a vicious cycle, but a downward spiral. The challenge before us is not to respond to hate with violence, but to foster a society that values community above enmity. My friend, Ali Dineen, a musician and activist, told me that we should not seek to call our adversaries out; rather we should call them in. I might have asked that Trump supporter to talk instead of berate him. I might have simply asked him what his name was, undoing bigotry is a long process that starts with a conversation. In the coming years I fear that resistance may come to mean armed conflict, and though my soldier's heart sometimes yearns to fight again, I don't want to fight my own countrymen. Violence can only deepen the deep divide in America, but making violence obsolete, having a vision for the future that includes our enemies, that kind of resistance can bridge the divide in our country. I spent four years in the Army practicing the art of war; now in revolt, I have the chance to build rather than destroy.

Photo Credit: Ken Shin

Correction: A previous version of this essay stated that Gene Sharp was a professor at NYU.